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THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN'S SPIRITUAL BEING

Lecture by Dr. Rudolf Steiner, delivered at The Hague
on October 31st, 1922.

Let me first of all apologise to you for not delivering this lecture in the language of your country, but as I am not at home in this language I must ask you to allow me to give you the following explanations in that to which I am accustomed.

Whoever wishes to speak to day of man's spiritual being and the knowledge connected with it, will surely find among cultivated modern men a certain interest in this subject. The destiny which has befallen people in many spheres of modern civilised life to day, has caused great confusion and uncertainty in regard to what comes to meet them from the external world. Consequently many are now seeking in the human soul itself that which they once sought almost exclusively in the external world; in the depths of the human soul they seek for forces which are able to support them and which can give them that certainty needed by their inner being for the development of a sound, strong life.

But on the other hand, if we would speak to day, as I intend to do now, of man's knowledge of his own spiritual being, in accordance with the mentality of the present time, we immediately encounter the resistance of that world-conception which should be of the greatest value to us to-day: we meet with the resistance of the scientific world, which, for the most varied reasons working in hidden depths, must vindicate its own knowledge. Science asserts that it is not possible to rise into the supersensible or spiritual world with the aid of those methods to which scientists are accustomed. Modern civilisation has taken hold of man in such a way, that he now considers everything in a light derived in one way or another from his scientific knowledge. And so it is that in accordance with a modern education, man no longer seeks to satisfy his soul-life with old traditional beliefs, but he feels the need with regard to the spiritual world, to strive after such knowledge of it as can justify itself in the face of the

*) From stenographic notes unrevised by the lecturer.

scientific requirements of the present.

The anthroposophical world-conception aims at just such a knowledge of man's spiritual being, and to-day and next Friday I shall speak to you in this sense; to-day more especially concerning the knowledge of man's spiritual being, and next Friday concerning the knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe.

What do we really mean, when we speak of man's spiritual being as the deepest riddle of life? - This does not imply any doubt of the spirit's existence, nor of its activity within the human being. Anyone who reflects even a little on his own being, will feel that that which is spiritual in him is that which confers true dignity upon him, raising him above other beings in the world. Indeed, we may say that even the most convinced materialist can hardly question the existence and value of man's spiritual life; the only thing he could question is the independent existence of spiritual life in human nature. He might say that what we acknowledge as man's spiritual being comes from the body, from something physical, just as the candle's flame comes from the candle. Man's spirit comes from the body, from something physical, say the materialists, and it dies with the physical body.

But is it justifiable to have such deep doubts, if not in the real existence, at least in the destiny of man's spiritual being; is this justifiable in face of the fact that the spirit must be recognised as that part in man which raises him to the dignity and worth of a human being? Yes, it is justifiable, and made possible by ordinary life. For, after all, only those doubts are present in the knowledge of the spiritual, which are present also unconsciously in ordinary human life, doubts which make us feel uncertain, when we seek enlightenment concerning the true essence of man's spiritual being.

These doubts assail us from many directions, particularly in those who have attained a modern scientific education. Among the many doubts which can beset a man, let me mention two principal ones, though in ordinary life one is not clearly aware of them, for many things which rise up in human consciousness are deeply rooted in the unconscious or sub-conscious depths of the human soul. They do not appear as clear concepts, nor as clearly formulated doubts, but as something uncertain, coming from the soul's innermost depths and determining man's inner happiness, or his inner lack of stability. One doubt, which does not come to full consciousness - and I wish to emphasize this clearly - but which comes all the more strongly in the feeling life, is that one which questions the destiny of the spiritual in man, and this is something which, as human beings, we encounter in every human destiny.

In the course of each day, we sink into sleep, and this dims our spiritual life which has been active throughout the day, finally, our spiritual life is completely extinguished, until it returns to the surface and fills our consciousness when we awake.

It is this extinguishing, this daily disappearance of spiritual life which renders us uncertain whenever we ask ourselves: Does the human spirit have a life of its own? Does it not rise out of man's physical life, as does the flame out of the candle, as man gradually develops from a dim state of consciousness to an ever clearer one? Does not the life of the spirit and the soul die out again, when the body passes through death, just as the flame flickers out, when the combustible material is exhausted?

All we seek after, in order to eliminate sore doubts and to solve life's deep riddles, really proceeds from our daytime consciousness. In reality - and this is the other aspect which I must emphasize - our waking daytime life does not differ from our sleeping life. For while we see that sleep extinguishes our spirit, we see, on the other hand, that during the day, when we are awake, the spirit is submerged, as it were, as far as its activity is concerned, in the darkness of its own body.

Is it much then, that our thoughts can hold in clear consciousness? Undoubtedly we have thoughts. But if we ask ourselves: How does our soul work, when we simply move our hand, when this primitive manifestation of the will takes place? If we ask this question, we can only answer: We form the thought, that the hand is to be raised, but this thought disappears in the darkness of the bodily organisation. Through our ordinary consciousness, we do not know what our soul does within our organism, in order to send its forces like lightning through the muscles, thus producing the will-action. We see the final result of the hand which moves - and this again is a thought, a representation - we observe ourselves passing from thought to thought, and see an external occurrence as a result. But the way in which our soul-spiritual part dives down into our body, this really remains hidden to us.

Anthroposophy, as a modern science of the spirit, seems to overcome this darkness and this obliteration which I described just now, for these doubts must always be overcome, in every epoch of the human soul's development.

I might define the aims of Anthroposophy as an exact clairvoyance, and with this designation I wish to distinguish the knowledge derived through Anthroposophy from all those ~~nebulous~~ nebulous, mystical conceptions which take hold of people to such a great extent in our time of uncertainty and instability. This exact clairvoyance seeks fully to take into account the requirements of a modern scientific mentality.

What are the requirements of a modern scientific mentality? To survey our sense-perceptions with a clear inner vision, through observation and through experimental work. The exact modern scientist, as he calls himself, seeks to attain, through his observation by his sense-perceptions, and through experimental work, that transparency and obedience to inner laws which may be found in mathematics. That

is why scientists like so much to apply mathematical thoughts to scientific subjects. They would really like to apply mathematical thoughts to everything, because these thoughts render everything so exact - that is to say, transparent and in keeping with inner laws.

Men who speak to-day in this sense of an exact science, aim at mathematical exactness in the observation of external objects and processes, and - if they wish to be psychologists - even in the observation of psychological processes.

Anthroposophy, according to our meaning, also adopts this exact method, but to begin with, it does not apply it to the external world, nor to the observation of sensory objects and external sensory experiments; it applies this exactness to something which is at first not accessible to human consciousness: to the development of soul forces which lie concealed in man's innermost being, but which can be raised to the surface

Anthroposophy, a science of the spirit, has indeed learned from natural science that it is not possible to penetrate into a spiritual, supersensible world with the aid of external experiments and with methods which have brought so many triumphs to natural science, though spiritual science fully acknowledges these triumphs. From natural science, Anthroposophy has learned that man's soul-forces, as they exist in ordinary life and even in ordinary science, are, to begin with, unable to penetrate into the supersensible world. The human soul must first adapt itself to this, and forces must be brought to the surface which lie deeply buried in the soul's depths. It is possible for this to be brought about in an inner, mystical and unclear manner; but the spiritual science of Anthroposophy strictly rejects this. It seeks, instead, to draw out of human nature the hidden forces of the soul, and in so doing it adopts a method which surveys things just as clearly as does ordinary science, following the same inner necessities which are adopted in scientific research, when sense-perceptions or experiments are observed.

With regard to the development of the human soul-forces, Anthroposophy works in the same way as do the exact sciences, when they observe external Nature in its finished aspect, applying an exact method which surveys the whole. Anthroposophy deals with the human soul with the same inner clarity, transparency and necessity which would be applied by the strictest mathematician in his investigations. The methods of this exact clairvoyance seek to develop the human soul in such a way that its own development becomes, to begin with, a mathematical problem.

This emphasizes the fact that anthroposophical spiritual science, as it is here meant, does not believe that the spirit can be investigated in the same way in which things are investigated in ordinary natural science, but it brings into spiritual research that genuine scientific attitude which is contained in natural science. The exact part of Anthroposophy is to begin with, the way in which it works upon

those forces of the soul which lead to a clairvoyant vision of the supersensible world.

This alone can show you that one (let us call him a spiritual investigator) who strives after knowledge of man's spiritual being, turns, as it were, to his own inner self, in order to illumine his soul from within. He fills it with light and with strength.

What should in this sense become a mode of modern spiritual investigation, can be understood best of all if I remind you of the fact that a similar knowledge of the spirit was already striven after during past epochs of man's spiritual development. Such knowledge was striven after, I might say, in a more material way. And since the modern method (I shall describe it to you afterwards) is of a more spiritual and psychic nature, it will be easier to understand it, if we first proceed from the coarser and more material aspect of older methods.

In past ages of human evolution and speaking generally, we must to some extent observe man's attitude towards his environment. It is so easy to believe that throughout all historical times the human race has had the same soul-constitution as to-day. But this is not so. Those who have an inner vision of man's soul-life, will find that if they go back but a few centuries, men had different thoughts, feelings and impulses - and that the whole constitution of their soul was different from what it is to-day. And if we go back thousands of years in human evolution, everything is essentially different. The external historical monuments can throw little light upon things, for in the first place, they do not reach back into very remote ages, even if we see, for example, the Egyptian monuments of the most ancient time. In the second place, everything depends upon the way in which men interpret these monuments to-day. They discover in them this or that, which is after all nothing but a reproduction of their own attitude of soul, and they imagine that this must also have existed in the souls of the ancient human race.

Spiritual science looks upon the soul-life of men belonging to an older epoch in a different way than does the ordinary historian. It contemplates that which has been preserved in, let us say, significant monuments of poetry or in other monuments, and it is able to form a conception of what is preserved in these monuments, as the breath of a spiritual life which is quite different from that of men to-day. And gradually spiritual science reaches the point of acknowledging that primeval men already possessed a kind of clairvoyance, although it was a dreamlike one, a clairvoyance which must appear misty and dreamlike in comparison with the requirements of modern times, which call for a clear consciousness. Yet this dreamlike consciousness, this clairvoyant consciousness of ancient times, was nevertheless able to look into the world's inner structure and into the spirituality of the world far more deeply than the modern consciousness based on the senses. In reality, the men of ancient times had an attitude towards the world which is entirely different

from the present one.

People say, that in ancient times man imagined all manner of things in his surroundings, that he saw a spiritual being in every plant and dreamt of the existence of spiritual beings in trees and bushes, in the water and in the waves, in clouds and winds. His consciousness was dreamy, to be sure, yet the soul spiritual beings that he saw in the water, in the fountains, in the clouds, in rain and wind, were not subjective, nor the product of his fantasy, but his soul constitution was of such a kind that the spiritual beings described by him as existing in the world, were really perceived by him just as naturally and with the same elemental power with which we perceive to-day the red or blue colours in our surroundings, or hear the sounds in our environment, or feel its warmth. To day we only experience sense-perceptions and their contents; but the human being of older times could experience, through this same elemental world, a spiritual essence permeating his whole natural environment. On the other hand, he could not experience an Ego so firmly based on its own self as is the Ego of modern man.

This experience of a firm Ego gradually developed in the course of time during the evolution of humanity, and with it, the experience of modern freedom. The older, dreamlike clairvoyance had to vanish, in order that this experience of freedom, this Ego-experience, might arise. Man has been limited to the external world of the senses. Within this world, he acquired his freedom. But to-day we have once more reached a time in which, placed as we are within the world of the sense, we must again strive to find the connection with the spiritual world: we live in a time in which we must again acquire a kind of clairvoyance. For reasons which have already been explained, this cannot be an old, dreamlike clairvoyance, but only an exact clairvoyance, following modern scientific requirements. In the past, man had a dreamlike clairvoyance, but just as to-day we cannot be satisfied with the ordinary science, so he was not satisfied with his dreamy clairvoyance, although he discovered spiritual beings everywhere, in plants, bushes, trees, clouds and winds. He was not satisfied with it and turned his gaze towards men who, in those ancient times, stood for the scientists and priests of to-day. In more remote times, he looked towards those men whom we may call Initiates (for they were felt to be Initiates), who, in their own way, but in a more material way than is the case to-day, and by developing special soul-forces, attained a kind of spiritual knowledge of man.

Yes, this was of a more material kind than would be permissible to day. Let me describe to you such an older kind of spiritual knowledge. Let me describe to you what has been handed down, in a more or less distorted form, in the external literature of the ancient Orient, let me describe to you what used to be practised by individual human beings in the times of the ancient Orient, in order to attain knowledge of a higher, spiritual world, and in order to transmit this knowledge to greater masses, living in a soul attitude which I have just now been describing to you.

(TO BE CONTINUED)